

# "Innovative design and top levels of equipment make the Tvan a special offroader "

*Article courtesy of Caravan World*

For every couple nervously taking their first uncertain journey out of town and into the unknown Australian outback, there are other pairs who have been out there many times, and for whom the inland regions hold no fears.

The fact is that plenty of Australian city dwellers are already very familiar with offroad touring. Some of them have been doing it for years with 4WDs and tents or swags, exploring and camping in places that others haven't even heard of.

Come retirement, or simply a time where sleeping on hard ground loses its appeal, their thoughts turn to something more comfortable. True 4WD adventurers are usually reluctant to accept the restrictions that even the most capable purpose built off road caravan may impose on them. Most of them will choose an off road camper trailer, probably one of the better known brands of tent trailer.



There are some well respected off road trailers around, but when it comes to comparisons, until recently there have been really only two types - the flip over and the fold out styles. The more sophisticated units have such conveniences as roll out kitchens and 12 volt power systems. Other models can be over-engineered and heavy, whilst the most basic may well fail to handle the demands of outback travel - many so-called off road trailers have been abandoned somewhere down the track.

It may have seemed that tent trailer design had reached a standstill, until last year that is, when the caravan and camping industry came up with its highly successful RVs of the New Millennium promotion. Among the very interesting and unusual models included in the exhibition, one the Tvan camper from Track Trailer, stood out as being quite remarkable in both appearance and function.

Until then not many people had heard of Track Trailer, but for the last decade this Melbourne company has been a quiet producer of the most technically advanced camping trailers in the country. It was the first to introduce a unit with independent suspension and since then has continued to develop and improve the concept. Its Type 3 chassis and MC-2 asymmetric link suspension system is now used by Australian defence forces to carry highly sensitive equipment.

The RVs of the New Millennium organisers challenged manufacturers to present completely new ideas. Track Trailer was one of the participants who went back to the drawing board and redesigned the product - keeping only its state of the art chassis and suspension as a base on which to build something different.

When it was displayed in 2000 the Tvan was only at the prototype stage, but the manufacturers were extremely serious about completing its development and getting it into production as quickly as possible. Now, Tvans are being built to order at the company's Bayswater factory in Melbourne's east, and recently Caravan World was fortunate enough to be able to borrow one for a weekend trip to Victoria's high country.

### Revolutionary Design

Tvan is nothing like any other camper trailer we've ever used. It is described by its manufacturer as "a new generation accommodation and load carrying TV system for long distance outback touring", which just about says it all. As well as looking sensational, it is so well mannered and easy to use that it offers a very valid alternative for people who may be thinking the time has come to get into an off road caravan.

The unit's solid body is Fibreglass and inside is a comfortable fixed sleeping compartment, combined with a quality fold out canvas extension on a solid floor. On each side there is a storage compartment, one containing a roll out stainless steel kitchen, complete with two burner gas stove and conventional sink. The other compartment is large enough to carry all your tools, provisions and cooking and eating utensils, while a big storage area under and in front of the double bed is available for a fridge and as many personal items as you wish to carry.

The Tvan has a well protected 70 litre water tank fitted high up in the chassis, plus niches built in around its exterior designed to carry extra water containers and jerry cans for fuel. The A frame carries the spare wheel, twin 4 kg gas bottles with a changeover valve, and a 12 volt deep cycle battery. The aluminium rear section (which actually becomes the floor when deployed) contains racks and tie downs that enable you to carry firewood or more tools and equipment. Everything on the outside of the unit can be safely locked or padlocked to the body sections for security.

The Tvan is packed with features to enhance comfort and ease of use. Water to the kitchen sink is delivered in a brisk flow with help from a 12 volt pump. If you want water without opening the kitchen, there's a hand pump fitted in a handy niche. The interior is well lit with 12 volt spotlights and there are several 12 volt outlets on the outside into which portable lights or accessories can be plugged. A "power box" in the sleeping area adds versatility to the system - in a caravan park you can plug in the 240 volt supply and run your lights and accessories as well as recharging the battery.

The sleeping area is extremely comfortable with enough room to choose the optional queen sized mattress if preferred and even an extension pad that makes it long enough to suit taller occupants. Settling for a conventional double mattress gives you more storage in the remaining space. A ventilation hatch is located in the roof.

A major bugbear for tent trailer users is wet canvas. In conventional models, this invariably has to be bundled up on top of the bed, and elaborate precautions have to be taken to avoid soaking the mattress. The Tvan design has overcome that annoying problem. The tent section is folded into a net suspended from the lift up roof, which closes down over the back of the unit for travel, so that it does not make contact with other contents.



Deploying the fold out section has been made simple by well thought out fittings. The tent has a sewn in floor, made in Australia by a well respected local company, and is complete with flyscreened doors and windows. The first move is to unclip the anodised aluminium deck and fold it down, then over again to its full length

(adjustable "legs" are supplied to support the deck and keep it level). Then open the Tvan's fibreglass roof section and allow it to raise and support itself with the help of the gas struts. The net is then unzipped to allow the tent to drop down.

After that it is easy to fit the canvas into the seals around the edges of the cabin, attach the extending aluminium poles to support the walls and clip the floor to the deck all round. With practice the whole operation should take only a few minutes.

One of the best things about the Tvan, as CW found, is that it can be used without the tent section for overnight stops and quick morning getaways - simply open the back, climb inside and close it behind you.

It is also ideal for balmy nights when you want to enjoy the breeze and see the stars. On these occasions you can leave the tent in its sling and the rear hatch open, and use the zip on insect screen to keep mozzies out of your bedroom.



### High Country Excursion

CW's Ford Explorer and the Tvan looked good together. The Explorer is rounded and sexy looking but not over the top. The Tvan has a precise look with sharp angles, smooth sides, fibreglass sandwich panels and a go anywhere air about it that's attributed to a healthy ground clearance. Side on, the Tvan is about the same height as the high end of the Explorer's roof rack.

Ready for the road and during towing, Tvan is very noticeable. At the fuel pumps or outside a roadside rest stop like the Dargo Pub at the foot of Victoria's real high country, the combo attracts attention. There were bar side comments such as, "It

looks like something out of International Rescue", but there were also looks of envy from the strong silent black T-shirted brigade, taking a breather just having crossed over the top from the other side of Victoria the hard way. Tvan tows like a well mannered and trained blue heeler. You know it's there, but its presence is sensed rather than seen. Behind the Explorer, the "tomorrow looking" Tvan was barely felt, although its tare is 700 kg, and CW guesses that it was carrying around 200 kg of gear, courtesy of our host Russell Guest 4WD Adventure Safaris.

Despite the awesome clearance and the almost military stance of the Tvan's suspension, CW didn't push the outer limits of off road endeavour. Instead, the combination was pushed up that challenging gradient from Dargo to beyond the site of the old mining settlement of Grant.

Grant no longer exists but the climb, on a narrow and winding road, certainly does. Beyond the historic site, the bitumen ends and the road becomes an unsealed track that continues over the ranges to join up with the Great Alpine Road near Hotham Alpine Village.

CW intended to travel the entire distance and give the Tvan's superb suspension a work out on some bumpy rutted tracks. The depths of winter, however, is not a good time to attempt such a climb. As we charged the mountain, a south easterly system blew in, with ice rain and severe winds that turned the road surface into mush. Even on the blacktop, a mix of water, mud and the detritus of the tall timber made the going quite unpleasant, even though the combination of a nimble Explorer and its well balanced charge handled the ascent with ease.

The road up to Grant and the commencement of the gravel track to Bright is steep and although the load behind the Explorer wasn't extreme, the work of its V6 was obvious by the gyrations of the tacho needle. While the RPM fluctuated as the rig tackled the grade, inside all was peace and warmth, the way it should be in any kind of weather.

Next morning at our campsite in the clouds, we set up the Tvan's tent hurriedly between squalls, for the purpose of a photo shoot. A little less haste and more care would have eliminated the slight creases in its sides, but we were anxious to avoid returning the unit in a wet and muddy state. The visit to the long abandoned site of Grant was anti-climactic. Thirty knot winds swayed the tall timber and strips of bark lashed CW's progress, the gravel road over the top beckoned, but the call of a roast beef lunch at the Dargo Pub was stronger. We decided to turn around and make the descent.

On the way down the combination of Ford Explorer and Tvan continued to behave impeccably although, on the steepest inclines, electric brakes would have been more comforting than the hydraulic overrides on our unit, even though this system is effective. Track Trailers is now fitting electric brake systems to most of its models.

CW's exercise covered 240kms. The Explorer was filled at the servo at the start of the climb up to Dargo that also included the hard going romp through the ranges to an altitude of 900 metres in towing mode. For that exercise, the Explorer did get thirsty, but that's a steep haul to 900 plus metres, and for wintry enjoyment, it was

about the best fifty bucks CW has spent fuel wise in a country mountain mile (the roast at the Dargo pub was good!

